

**The General Assembly Adoption of the  
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities  
December 13, 2006**

**Accommodation for Deaf Participants**

During the preparation for the adoption event, Emmanuel Shwan, a Deaf Research Associate with Global Action on Aging, and Dr. Liisa Kauppinen, President Emerita of the World Federation of the Deaf, separately requested accommodation service, either a sign language interpreter or a speech-to-text service. The event coordinator informed them that it was not possible. Mr. Shwan and Dr. Kauppinen made their own interpreting arrangements.

They then separately requested that the event coordinator reserve an area in the front of the auditorium designated for NGO participants, customarily the best arrangement for a Deaf client and the sign language interpreter. The event coordinator again denied their request and stated it was beyond her control. However, she did reserve an area for wheelchair users.

For past UN-related events, Mr. Shwan had requested a reservation of seats in front for him and his service provider who is usually his GAA colleague. In this case, a different event coordinator usually insured this arrangement with no problem and often with enthusiasm.

On the morning of the adoption event, there were altogether four Deaf participants, each one from a different country: the United States, Finland, South Korea, and Chile. They all brought their own sign language interpreter. They all proceeded to reserve the front area of the auditorium and the

interpreters fetched portable chairs to be able to sit face-to-face the Deaf clients.

There was a partially blind woman who was sitting alone in the front row section and they explained to her their accommodation needs and asked her if she was willing to move to another seat. The woman refused at first and finally she was willing to move. Soon after the Deaf participants and the interpreters set themselves up, several security officers arrived, saying that the interpreters' sitting arrangement was not acceptable and was a violation of their safety code because they were in "danger of falling backward." The Deaf participants and the interpreters explained to the security officers the necessity of this arrangement and they still insisted that it was not possible.

Due to the Deaf participants' persistence and support they received from the nearby hearing participants at the auditorium, the security officers said they would speak to their supervisor, the safety director. The safety director came and said, "I don't have a problem with it. It is their rights."

### **The Adoption of the Convention**

The first human rights document to be proposed for adoption in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century was the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Even though it has a record of being the quickest document to be processed in the history of the United Nations, it came after tedious work requiring tremendous amounts of dedication and commitment from all participants.

The Mexican Mission initiated the project for the drafting of the document. Many NGOs and persons with disabilities took part of this process. One of the notable people who dedicated his time and energy to make this

possible were Ambassador McCay, who was the chair of the Ad Hoc committee.

At 10:45 AM, less than one hour after the General Assembly went into session, the Convention was adopted. This was a cause for celebration for the 650 million people with disabilities around the world.

### **Persons with Disabilities**

Persons with disabilities deserve the rights that those without disabilities enjoy. They have the right to health, education, culture, and other aspects of life. Even though the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights clearly stated that every human being is entitled to those human rights, it was necessary to adopt a human rights treaty specifically designed for persons with disabilities. Societies and governments have neglected and denied people with disabilities their basic rights. Therefore the only way to ensure that people with disabilities enjoy the same protection is by the enforcement of law.

For the most part, the only difference between a person with disabilities and a person without disability is the physical disability itself. Their intelligence, personal skills, as well as physical skills are not affected by their disabilities are the same as their non-disabled counterparts. Therefore persons with disabilities have a lot to contribute to society and societies in turn should welcome the contributions they can make. In order to succeed with that goal, it is necessary to provide the disabled with the necessary accommodations to enable their successful integration into society.

Societies must change their perceptions of persons with disability and eradicate all the stereotypes and oppressive attitudes associated with them. Persons with disabilities must be perceived as individuals who have the same need for respect, dignity, and rights as those without disabilities.

### **Elderly Persons with Disabilities**

This Convention does not protect only persons with disabilities, but also persons who *will* get disability in the future. Half of the elderly people in the world have disabilities and many of them did not have those disabilities for most of their lives, developing them only as they got aged. With the proportion of elderly people increasing over time, this means more and more people will become disabled.

Elderly people deserve the same fundamental human rights as their younger counterparts and the development of disabilities does not mean that they should be excluded from society. Forcing elderly persons with disabilities into a home away from society is not a solution. Neither is isolating or treating them without dignity. They have the right to have the same access to society and receive the same kind of respect, opportunity, and treatment that their non-disabled peers enjoy.

### **Implementation**

The UN General Assembly adoption of this Convention is a significant milestone. It shows that the United Nations recognizes the reality of the conditions of persons with disabilities around the world. However, the battle is far from being over. Now Member States must bring the Convention to their

legislatures to have them ratify the document, legally binding the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities. Then they will need to start implementing the Convention in all aspects of life.

If a nation has anti-discrimination laws for persons with disabilities, then it must ensure that the laws cover all items covered in the Convention. If they are weak, the government must strengthen them. It will be a long, tedious process, but it can be done and in the long run, both persons with disabilities and those without will benefit from its implementation.

NGOs, disability organizations, and individuals who care about this cause must take active roles by negotiating, lobbying, and educating government officials about the importance of these needs. Most importantly, it is the *United Nations* that needs to set an example to the Member States by implementing the accommodations dictated in the Convention.

The United Nations needs to educate its employees how to accommodate different kinds of disabilities, so to avoid situations like the one the Deaf participants encountered during the General Assembly adoption event. The United Nations needs to make the building accessible for persons who are blind or are in a wheelchair. It also needs to provide sign language interpreters or speech-to-text services for persons who are deaf or have some kind of hearing loss.

## **Conclusion**

The adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is an important chapter in the United Nations history. Changes will not happen overnight, but with perseverance, education, effort, and constant

action, changes will take place. The world won't be perfect, but it will be a better place for persons with disabilities and they will be able to enjoy what society has to offer, and society in turn will enjoy what they have to offer.